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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

MR. CHESTERTON in times past has argued ably for the superficial aspect of things, saying truth lay on the surface, and the first glance was the best. He has been very consistent in the application of this principle, and has seldom stopped to think a second time. This at one time occasioned much scandal among serious reviewers, who, having no notion of the latitude of literature, damned him for literal inexactitude. It was especially noticeable in our own country, where literary "culture," being rare, is enormously conscious of itself and meticulous. For five or six years after Mr. Chesterton began writing his agreeable fantasies, serious American critics continued to lament that they were not judicious. I remember that on the appearance of a particularly riotous and amusing volume of his, one of them remarked that Mr. Chesterton had already published several books "at an age when many a scholar is, with much self-questioning and many doubts, first venturing to contribute of his accumulated treasure toward the enrichment of the world's thought." For a long time it was necessary to explain to those academic and literal-minded persons that Mr. Chesterton was not a scholar or a guide or a counselor, and not at all the sort of man who could safely be made Professor of English Literature or the editor of the *Chicago Dial* or the Commissioner of Education, and yet should not be spurned utterly, for all that. And for a long time it did no good whatever. They merely hissed "impressionist" and "mountebank," and said he had formed the habit of standing on his head. Many critics would make that last remark with an air of great bitterness, yet without offering a shadow of proof that they had put their own heads to any

¹ *The Flying Inn*. By Gilbert K. Chesterton. New York: John Lane Company, 1914.

better use. His *Heretics*, for example, was condemned by stern London judges for blasphemy because it implied that St. Peter was a "snob," and Mr. Chesterton was warned that henceforth his books would be excluded from respectable homes.

Times have changed, and nowadays he seems to be read in a more care-free spirit. Fewer people resort to him solely with a view to mental growth or moral fortification, and dignified reviewers generally confine themselves to saying how breathless he leaves them. They return from each new book as from a snowball fight with a grandson. Thus this latest volume, *The Flying Inn*, is generally acclaimed as "merry," "mad," "hilarious," "dizzy," full of the "wine of laughter," "kaleidoscopic," and a "breathless rush of rollicking nonsense." In this instance these explosive praises are somewhat misleading. The reading of *The Flying Inn* can be achieved with perfect calmness, and may even bring a little weariness to those who have really enjoyed its three predecessors, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, and *Manalive*.

A reader who is not bored by Mr. Chesterton some of the time probably gets very little genuine pleasure out of him any of the time. For his determination to cause astonishment often leads to a sort of routine in over-emphasis. Page after page is written apparently with no other purpose than that some old gentleman should call him outrageous. There are chapters wherein, apparently, he stops thinking for himself altogether and contents himself with inserting negatives into what he conceives to be other people's thoughts. This is especially true of his essays. "The fundamental fact of our time is the failure of the successful man." "A revolutionist would say (with perfect truth) that coal-owners know next to nothing about coal-mining. But we are past that point. Coal-owners know next to nothing about coal-owning." "We human beings have never worshiped nature; and, indeed, the reason is very simple. It is that all human beings are superhuman beings." These things, scattered all through the pages of his essays, spring too obviously from his horror of sleepiness. He has said somewhere that "a yawn is a stifled yell."

He is at his best when he forgets his vow to set the river on fire, and *The Flying Inn* is too strictly governed by that grim resolve. He has done the same sort of thing before,

and done it better, and it reads in part like rather a forced gesture in self-imitation, reminding one a little of the lamentable case of the Professor in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* who, under unfavorable conditions, tries to repeat his triumph of "The One-Hoss Shay":

I'm the fellah that tole one day
The tale of the won'erful one-hoss shay.
Wan' to hear another? Say,
Funny, wasn't it? Made *me* laugh—
I'm too modest, I am, by half—
Made me laugh's though I sh'd split.
Cahn' a fellah like a fellah's own wit?
Fellahs keep sayin'—"Well, now—that's nice;
Did it once but cahn' do it twice."

And when the Autocrat told him tenderly but firmly that he smelt of spirits, "two large tears orb'd themselves between the Professor's eyelids," for it seemed that he had been taking chloroform to have a tooth out, and an alcohol lamp had been spilt on his legs.

The Flying Inn is the fanciful tale of a gigantic mad Irishman who capers about the country with a barrel of rum and a round cheese in order to evade a new law passed by a fanatical government closing all the public houses in the British Isles. Lord Ivywood, after getting his prohibition law through Parliament, closes up an inn called "The Old Ship" on his own estate, but Patrick Dalroy, the Irishman, and the proprietor, Humphrey Pump, seizing the sign, escape with it and with the rum and the cheese. Owing to the loose wording of the law, it applies only to stationary public houses, and they are able to sell liquor at their flying inn, that is to say, wherever they set the sign up. This they do at the most unexpected places—for example, at a hall where a Higher Thought meeting is held, at a model village inhabited by persons who live on medicated milk, and at Lord Ivywood's own door. Any true Chestertonian will readily imagine the loud incongruities of these adventures, the riotous drinking songs shouted on inappropriate occasions, and the persistent tilting at what the author regards as manifestations of the "Modern" spirit in contrast to the spirit of some imaginary past epoch when human nature was altogether different from what it is to-day.

Take, for example, the model village of health-seekers who live on Dr. Meadows's far-famed medicated milk. The

name of it was Peaceways, and it corresponded to what we call a Garden City, with everything in it perfectly hygienic, regular, and monotonous. Dr. Meadows, the founder, had discovered the secret of longevity.

He attracted many pupils and backers among the wealthy and influential; young men who were, so to speak, training for extreme old age, infant old men, embryo nonagenarians. It would be an exaggeration to say that they watched joyfully for the first white hair as Fascination Fledgeby watched for his first whisker; but it is quite true to say that they seemed to have scorned the beauty of women and the feasting of friends, and, above all, the old idea of death with glory, in comparison with this vision of the sports of second childhood.

“Progress in the modern sense,” says Mr. Chesterton in his *Miscellany of Men*, “is a very dismal drudge; and mostly consists of being moved on by the police.” This view pervades the present volume, which, apart from the story, is a satire on a series of modern notions and movements—philanthropy, teetotalism, vegetarianism, eugenics, religious eclecticism, humanitarianism, sanitary reform, futurism, and many other things concerning which any man who has not happened to read the same magazines and newspapers as Mr. Chesterton will be in some doubt. He has confounded the “modern spirit” with his own more or less accidental experience in contemporaneity, and the result of it is that no one who has not traveled the same route can make out in all cases the butt of his ridicule. Moreover, although the book is marked by a strong desire to make fun, it betrays some indecision as to what actually is to be made fun of. It is as if he had got himself into high spirits in a great hurry and without finding a suitable object on which to let them go.

The nonsense rhymes are the best part of it.

Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire.
And after him the parson ran, the sexton, and the squire,
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
That night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.

His sins they were forgiven him; or why do flowers run
Behind him; and the hedges all strengthening in the sun?
The wild thing went from left to right and knew not which was which,
But the wild rose was above him when they found him in the ditch.

God pardon us, nor harden us; we did not see so clear
The night we went to Bannockburn by way of Brighton Pier.

Lord Ivywood, who evidently represents the spirit of "modern enlightenment" and "advance," wishes to combine all that is good in the religions of both the East and West. Specifically he aims at the union of Islam and Christianity in a new and better type of faith, which the mad Irishman calls derisively "Chrislam." Lord Ivywood is an evolutionist, an apostle of "relativity," with so open a mind that almost anything can get into it, and he becomes possessed with the idea that England should be Orientalized—mainly on vegetarian and teetotalistic grounds.

I shall always give a high place, said he, as Islam has always given a high place, to that figure, mythical or no, which we find presiding over the foundations of Christianity. I cannot doubt that the fable, incredible and revolting otherwise, which records the rush of swine into the sea, was an allegory of his early realization that a spirit, evil indeed, does reside in all animals in so far as they tempt us to devour them. I cannot doubt that the Prodigal leaving his sins among the swine is another illustration of the great thesis of the Prophet of the Moon. But here, also, progress and relativity are relentless in their advance; and not a few of us may have risen to-day to the point of regretting that the joyful sounds around the return of the Prodigal should be marred by the moaning of a calf.

Interspersed with this sort of thing we have by way of refutation the songs of the peripatetic inn-keeper:

God made the wicked Grocer
For a mystery and a sign
That men might shun the awful shops
And go to inns to dine;
Where the bacon's on the rafter
And the wine is in the wood,
And God that made good laughter
Has seen that they are good.

The righteous minds of innkeepers
Induce them now and then
To crack a bottle with a friend
Or treat annoneyed men;
But who hath seen the Grocer
Treat housemaids to his teas,
Or crack a bottle of fish-sauce,
Or stand a man a cheese?

Why in the end Lord Ivywood turns out a hopeless lunatic while the mad Irishman is revealed as the type of perfect

sanity will be clear to any one who recalls Mr. Chesterton's doctrine that logic in human affairs leads straight to the madhouse, whereas the divine inconsistencies of the Christian faith are the only sure guides in practical living. It resounds with the usual Chestertonian exaggerations, which I suppose the author defends on the ground that a hot half-truth is better than a cold whole one.

There is some excellent caricature of types with which he is manifestly familiar—especially in the domain of political journalism. For example, there is the gentleman, “known by what seemed to the non-journalistic world the singular name of Hibbs However.” No one could have conceived this character who had not absorbed a great many leading articles in the *London Times*. The nearest approach to him in this country is the conspicuously “safe and sane” editorial writer on newspapers that represent the “better element.” The nickname arose from “the almost complicated caution with which all his public criticisms were qualified at every turn.”

As his salary grew larger (for editors and proprietors like that sort of thing) and his old friends fewer (for the most generous of friends cannot but feel faintly acid at a success which has in it nothing of the infectious flavor of glory) he grew more and more to value himself as a diplomatist; a man who always said the right thing. But he was not without his intellectual nemesis; for at last he became so very diplomatic as to be darkly and densely unintelligible. People who knew him had no difficulty in believing that what he said was the right thing, the tactful thing, the thing that should save the situation; but they had great difficulty in discovering what it was. In his early days he had had a great talent for one of the worst tricks of modern journalism, the trick of dismissing the important part of a question as if it could wait, and appearing to get to business on the unimportant part of it. Thus, he would say, “Whatever we may think of the rights and wrongs of the vivisection of pauper children, we shall all agree that it should only be done, in any event, by fully qualified practitioners.” But in the later and darker days of his diplomacy, he seemed rather to dismiss the important part of a subject, and get to grips with some totally different subject. . . . He was just as likely to say, “Whatever we may think of the rights and wrongs of the vivisection of pauper children, no progressive mind can doubt that the influence of the Vatican is on the decline.” His nickname had stuck to him in honor of a paragraph he was alleged to have written when the American President was wounded by a bullet fired by a lunatic in New Orleans, and which was said to have run: “The President passed a good night and his condition is greatly improved. The assassin is not, however, a German, as was at first supposed.” Men stared at that mysterious conjunction till they wanted to go mad and shoot somebody themselves.

F. M. COLBY.